

SFPT Orchid Glade report August 2014

Rainy days at the end of August may be tough for families on the beach, but for the Orchid Glade they will prolong the flowering period of the luxuriant swathes of flowers. As promised on the SFPT blog, the reserve is indeed a sea of yellow from hoary ragwort, common fleabane, agrimony and square-stemmed St John's wort. Following the rain, the sun beamed down on hordes of nectar-laden flowers, to the joy of clouded yellow, speckled wood, small tortoiseshell, gatekeeper and comma butterflies. Overhead circled a mewing buzzard: they are in our airspace so often it is likely a pair has nested in a nearby wood.

Beside the pond, the damp bank exposed to the sun by tree removal is being rapidly colonised by clumps of the blue-grey hard rush (hard because the stems are solid and can't be squashed), and the diminutive, acrid corn mint. Common centaury and St John's wort will both move into this new habitat. Small ponds with fluctuating water levels are valuable to wildlife. The area between low water and high water is called the draw-down zone, and many invertebrate species, mosses and other small plants are adapted for survival in this precarious habitat. Ruddy darter dragonflies — 'in tandem' — were sprinkling eggs onto the muddy bank.

As I watched, the first seeds from the willows and sallows at the back of the pond wafted up in the warm breeze and landed in the water and in the draw-down zone. The writing is on the wall: the exposed banks of the pond and the damp draw-down zone are the perfect place for a wandering willow seed to land and set up home. It's what willows do, and the Trust will work hard to control the annual crop of seedlings. Unfettered, they will shade the pond and also send roots into the mud to create lusty, water-sucking young trees.

If the occasional August rainy day is good for the flora, it means it is also good for the insects and other invertebrates that teem in the flowery areas and scrub and surrounding woodland. Most of them depend upon the flowers, nectar, pollen, leaves, seeds, berries, roots and sap provided by the vegetation. In the air, they are very hard to see. Overhead, a small swarm of southern hawker and migrant hawker

dragonflies zoomed, swooped and dived in their aerial chases. The eye of a dragonfly is a wonder of nature, and it evolved long before the appearance of the earliest dinosaur. The eye is compound, with up to 30,000 lenses: each gathers a separate image that is then combined with the others into a single image. They perceive UV and have a wider colour spectrum than we do, and they also have 360-degree vision. Nobody knows how a tiny dragonfly 'brain' instantly processes all that information. We do know however that ponds like the ones at the Orchid Glade and at the Fromus reserve are crucial to their survival, because of their pure water and plant life — both are key requirements.

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